

## **Addressing the Central American Refugee Crisis**

### **Remarks of U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.)**

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Last week I had the opportunity -- along with Secretary Jeh Johnson -- to visit a temporary facility for refugee mothers and their children in my home state of New Mexico.

The holding area at this facility in Artesia is one of several ways DHS is increasing its capacity to process the increasing number of families with children from Central America crossing our southwest border.

On Monday, 40 individuals were repatriated back to Honduras. And it's reported that more mothers and their children will be sent back to their countries of origin.

While I was at the facility, I saw firsthand the remarkable interagency effort it took to convert a portion of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center campus into a safe and humane place for families to stay while their cases are processed. But that's not all I gleaned from the visit.

I watched a young boy play soccer with his little brother, clearly happy to be in a secure environment where they could just be kids. And I saw mothers whose faces were worried, reflecting a clear concern for what the future would hold for them and their children. What I didn't see were cartel mules and drug runners, criminals and gang members. These were mothers and little kids. Most of these families come from one of the world's most violent regions.

This current crisis is of great concern to all of us. I've heard from a number of my constituents who want to know what they can do to help.

The local Chamber of Commerce in Artesia where I was last weekend has received hundreds of donations from compassionate New Mexicans hoping to make a difference in these families' lives. They understand that this is a humanitarian crisis first. They also understand that we are a nation of laws, but that our immigration system has long been broken and must be fixed.

The Senate worked for months to address this, but the Republican-led House refuses to even debate immigration reform, much less allow a vote on it. Instead, Republicans claim that the President's immigration policies, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA, caused the crisis at our border.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

The increase in unaccompanied children started before President Obama created the DACA program two years ago. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees has

documented an increased number of asylum seekers from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala since 2009, a full five years ago. What's more, children crossing the border would not be eligible for DACA or the Senate version of immigration reform. And these asylum seekers are not only fleeing to the United States, but also other neighboring countries including Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize. In fact, those countries saw a 712 percent spike in asylum claims from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala from 2008 to 2013—further demonstrating that children are not coming to the U.S. to apply for DACA but because their lives are at risk.

In interviews with over four hundred children, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees found that no less than 58 percent of them were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection—an increase of more than 400 percent from 2006. Less than 1 percent of these children spoke of “immigration reform” or some new program or policy as the basis for coming to the U.S. In fact, out of the 404 children, there were only four children who expressed a reason for coming that related to some knowledge of the U.S. immigration system.

The reality is, what's driving children to our borders is unimaginable violence, corruption, extreme poverty, and instability in their home countries. The exodus in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala is about children fleeing for their lives.

Honduras has the world's highest murder rate, with over 90 murders per 100,000 persons annually. Last year, approximately 1,000 young people under the age of 23 in Honduras were murdered in a nation of only 8 million. And a report published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops found that 93 percent of crimes perpetrated against youth in Honduras go unpunished. The National Observatory of Violence reported that violent deaths of women increased by 246 percent between 2005 and 2012.

This is all the more unsettling to me, because I know firsthand that it wasn't always this way. In the 1990s I traveled to Honduras with my wife Julie on our honeymoon. We flew into San Pedro Sula, a place that is now synonymous with murder. And while I wouldn't want to drive there again, we never feared for our safety.

To understand just how bad it is there now one can read a recent article in *The New York Times* by Frances Robles. It tells the chilling story of Cristian, an 11-year-old sixth grader from Honduras who lost his father in March after he was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. Three people he knows were murdered this year. Four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of \$5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her underwear in it, and left her body in a ravine across the street from Cristian's house.

And the story of Anthony, a 13-year old from Honduras, disappeared from his gang-ridden neighborhood, so his younger brother, Kenneth, hopped on his green bicycle to

search for him, starting his hunt at a notorious gang hangout. They were found within days of each other, both dead. Anthony, 13, and a friend had been shot in the head; Kenneth, 7, had been tortured and beaten with sticks and rocks. They were among seven children murdered in the La Pradera neighborhood of San Pedro Sula in April alone.

El Salvador and Guatemala have the world's fourth- and fifth-highest murder rate. The Center for Gender and Refugee Studies found that in 2011 El Salvador has the highest rate of gender-motivated killing of women in the world.

And in Guatemala, the Department of State reports widespread human rights problems, including institutional corruption, particularly in the police and judicial sectors; kidnapping, drug trafficking, extortion, and often-lethal violence against women.

We have a human crisis at our southern border that requires an immediate, but compassionate response. Yet instead of supporting the supplemental, which seeks to address the root causes of the crisis and protects these vulnerable children, Republicans are trying to use the crisis to promote fear and their border enforcement-only agenda.

Recently, a Republican Governor suggested the president send the National Guard to "Secure [the southern] border once and for all," and that "the border between the U.S. and Mexico is less secure today than at any time in the recent past."

That is simply not true.

The notion that lax border policies are somehow responsible for this latest crisis is not just a myth, it is a willful misrepresentation driven by politicians who would rather create a political issue than solve a real problem. The border today is more secure than it has ever been.

There are more border patrol agents on the ground and more resources and technology deployed on the border than in any time in our nation's entire history. In FY 2012, the Federal government spent \$17.9 billion on immigration enforcement. That is \$3.5 billion more than the budgets of all other Federal law enforcement agencies--FBI, DEA, ATF, Secret Service, and U.S. Marshalls Service--combined. These resources have been effective.

From FY 2009 to 2012, DHS seized 71 percent more currency, 39 percent more drugs, and 189 percent more weapons along the Southwest border as compared to the last four years of the previous Administration. But then it is important to remember that this refugee crisis isn't about children and families sneaking across the border like criminals. Many of these refugees seek out the first Border Patrol Agent they can find to turn themselves in. A number of children have walked across the border with identification safety-pinned to their shirts.

But that image doesn't serve the political interest of those who prefer a "border crisis" to a "refugee crisis."

Now let's step back and remember that the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration bill more than a year ago. A bill that included provisions to further strengthen the border, but that would also protect refugee children and crack down on smugglers and transnational criminal organizations. Notably, the bill was widely supported by both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate.

Public support and good economics have not been enough to convince House Republican leaders to hold a vote on immigration reform, but they can't turn a blind eye to the current humanitarian crisis along our nation's southern border.

Instead of attacking the President, Senate Republicans should work with him to address the issue. And they should demand that their colleagues in the House act to fix our broken immigration system. Additionally, passing the \$3.7 billion supplemental sends a clear signal that we are aggressively stemming the flow of children and families from Central America, while continuing to treat these refugee children humanely and as required by the law. This situation is an emergency and we need emergency funding.

Our immigrant communities have helped to write the economic, social and cultural story of America. I know this firsthand. My own father is an immigrant who came to America as a boy from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. As a nation, we value the twin promises of freedom and opportunity. Those ideals are important no matter where you were born. But our immigration system is broken.

Those of us who represent border communities understand the challenge we face, but there are solutions before us that are pragmatic, bipartisan, and uphold our American values. I'm familiar with the promise America represents for families. I know how hard immigrants work, how much they believe in this country, and how much they're willing to give back.

A small group of faith leaders from New Mexico penned an op-ed in the *Albuquerque Journal* over the weekend to share their thoughts on this humanitarian crisis – they wrote: “While the current situation raises the issues in powerful ways, expressing hatred toward, fear of, or anger with women and children serves nothing to resolve national debate. Rather, it engenders a destructive spirit of mistrust. Let us seek to understand the immigrant’s reasons for coming and to work collaboratively for just and reasonable immigration reform.”

It's time to fix our broken immigration system once and for all. Our short-term solution is to approve the president's emergency supplemental request now – our long-term solution is for House Republicans to put the Senate's immigration reform bill on the floor for a vote.

Our nation will be better for it.